

“Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?”

The Herodians and Pharisees that asked Jesus this question did not really expect an answer. These two political parties had opposing points of view when it came to the tax. One was in favor of it while the other was against it. In the narrow political worldview of first century Jerusalem, there was no answer that Jesus could have given that would satisfy everyone. And His enemies were constantly looking for ways to trip him up.

But Jesus shows again that the ways of God are not the ways of man and His thoughts are as far above ours as the heavens are above the earth. The original Greek may be paraphrased “pay back to Caesar that which is Caesar’s and pay back to God, that which is God’s.” Jesus elevated the question to an issue of justice.

We all owe the government a debt for certain services it provides for the common good, such as foreign relations and a police force. We are obligated to pay for those services as the price for living in a free society. But what do we owe to God, the source of all things? Where does our conscience draw the line between serving the state and serving God?

Every Christian holds a dual citizenship. By birth, we are born into the citizenship of an earthly nation. But by Baptism we are made citizens of a heavenly kingdom. Sometimes the two overlap, but our earthly citizenship will end with death. Our heavenly citizenship is eternal. Which one is more important?

Through the centuries there have been many saints and martyrs who have been put into the position of choosing one kingdom over the other. They show us the way. If we ever have to choose between our heavenly kingdom and our earthly citizenship, if we ever have to choose between following the laws of God or the laws of man, we must be true to our eternal home, the one that will last forever; even if it means pain and suffering here on earth.

One of our most beloved saints drew that line, Saint Thomas More. By the time he was 55, Thomas More had achieved as much power and wealth and honor as anyone could have hoped to achieve in 16th century England. He was the friend of kings, Chancellor of England, and respected all throughout Europe. But within 2 years he was beheaded as a traitor to his king. How did he fall so far so fast?

It was not his actions that brought him to this but rather the actions of his king, Henry VIII. Henry asked the Pope for an exception to the Sacrament of Matrimony. He asked the Pope to grant him a divorce from his queen. And the Pope said no. Unfortunately Henry had surrounded himself with power hungry advisors, and they convinced Henry that the Pope had no authority to tell a king, no. So Henry broke with the Church. He created his own church, the Church of England, with himself as its head. And to ensure the loyalty of his officers he created an act, a written oath, that all his noblemen, his ruling class, were expected to sign.

The act was put to nobles up and down the country and they all signed but when it came to Thomas More he refused. He called his refusal, silence. He would not sign the act and he would not tell anyone why he would not sign.

And for his silence they arrested him and put him on trial for treason. They did not have any evidence. Thomas More never said anything treasonable. So in the end they had to find someone who would come in and lie about him. Just as they lied about Jesus at His trial too. Jesus was accused of inciting people to rebellion by not paying the tax. And as they did with Jesus, so too with Thomas More, they sentenced him to death.

In the movie, *A Man for All Seasons*, Thomas More's last words were "I die the king's good servant, but God's first." In actuality what he said was "I die the king's good servant, AND God's first." Thomas More did not think it was an either/or situation. As Our Lord showed us, we have a debt to both God and country, and whenever possible we should honor them both. And Thomas More lived this. When it became clear to him that he could no longer effectively serve the king as Chancellor of England because of the Oath, he had to make a decision of conscience. He could not lie and take the Oath, that would serve only the king. He could not make a show out of rejecting the Oath; he did not seek a martyr's death, that would only serve only God. So Thomas More did the only thing he could that would serve both, he resigned as

Chancellor. He gave up his power, his position, and his wealth rather than betray God or his king.

Thomas Moore serves as a model for us in following our conscience. Now following one's conscience does not mean you should do whatever you think is right provided you have all the facts. Archbishop Chaput of Denver sets it out very simply when he says, "for Catholics, conscience demands a mind and heart well formed in the truth of Jesus Christ. And these come foremost through the teaching of the Catholic faith."

G.K. Chesterton wrote that Thomas More "is more important at this moment than at any moment since his death, even perhaps the great moment of his dying; but he is not quite so important as he will be in about a hundred years time." Chesterton wrote that, about a hundred years ago.

Thomas More was a man of conscience and a man of principles, and he died rather than betray either. This is why he still relevant even today.

Let us all take some time this evening while we are in prayer, (you do pray every evening don't you?) and reflect upon how we can be good citizens of the earth, giving to Caesar what belongs to him, as well as good citizens in Christ's kingdom, giving to God what belongs to Him.

Let's start with our heavenly citizenship. What belongs to God? What do we owe our heavenly Father? We find the answer in the very first pages of the Bible. All that we are, all that we possess, and all that we can hope for, has come to us from God. In the Book of Genesis we are told that we are made in the image and likeness of God. We bear the image of the one who made us just as surely as that Roman coin bore the image of the emperor who made it.

God called each of us into existence. He willed for each one of us to exist so that we can enter into a personal, loving, relationship with Him.

This is the whole purpose and goal of our lives. To enter into communion with God. It was once said of Saint Teresa of Calcutta, that it was sometimes difficult to tell where she ended and God began. That is the state we spend our entire lives working towards. We come from God and we are going toward God. We live a fully human life only if we freely live by our bond with God.

And so giving to God what belongs to God, means: obeying His commandments; following the example of Christ, Our Savior, and our model; and listening to, and heeding, the teachings of His Church.

Ignoring God and His commandments, as if He were some far away, disinterested, emperor, would be a kind of spiritual thievery, like stealing the emperor's coins.

The duties of our earthly citizenship are just as real, even though they are finite. They will end with the end of our lifetime here on earth.

“Caesar” is a symbol of the state, our civic and political community. As God is a community of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and we are created in God's image and likeness, we are created to be part of a community. It is our nature to want to help and support each other. To that end we have created systems of government designed to ensure the common good.

These systems provide us with many benefits, protection from crime, public services, and opportunities for personal and family development. And so it is our duty of justice to contribute to those systems by obeying good laws and actively collaborating with the common good through the paying of taxes, community service, and guiding our leaders by our votes

In democratic societies such as ours, we are responsible for staying informed about the issues that face our community. It is our duty to vote intelligently and responsibly. This sounds easy but it often is not. The media and the politicians who serve only themselves have become experts at making bad laws sound good. They would like to make us think that all laws bear equal weight.

But this is obviously not the case. If it were then we would punish petty theft with the same severity that we would punish one who robs us of our home and livelihood. This is life in some countries

that have not been shaped by the Catholic faith and the full revelation of God.

But it is precisely our faith that enables us to distinguish between foundational issues and secondary issues.

Protecting innocent human life, is a foundational issue. Marriage, as established by God, is a foundational issue. When we vote for our elected leaders, we cannot pretend that these issues are on the same level as other, important, but secondary issues.

Taxes, diplomacy, alternative energy sources, are important, but they are still secondary issues. Think of these secondary issues like the walls of a house. You can tear down some of the walls of a house without the house falling down. But if you mess with the foundation, the entire house comes tumbling down.

If foundational issues are at stake in an election, we must give them first priority. That includes voting for representatives who support those issues.

Foundational issues are those things that belong to God, not to Caesar. When Caesar tries to take them over, it is up to us to defend them.

But staying informed and voting responsibly, is only half of our democratic duty. As Christians we do not simply maintain society. As Christians it is our duty to build a society founded on Christian love and justice.

We do this by sharing our beliefs. Sociological studies have repeatedly shown that the single greatest influence on how people vote, is not the mass media, not the campaign commercials or the party platform. The single greatest influence on how a person votes is the input and advice they get from people they respect.

We should never be afraid to share our views and the Church's teachings in our conversations with others. Many people are unable to distinguish between foundational and secondary issues. It is up to us, as God's messengers, to feed them with the information they hunger for.

Edmund Burke said, "All it takes for evil to triumph, is for good men to do nothing."

We have more power than we know, more than those opposed to us would like us to know.

The age we live in is seductive. It cites reason and tolerance when it is neither reasonable nor tolerant. Saint Paul warns us not to conform ourselves to the age we live in. We are not to give in to the fads and fancies of society, we are to conform ourselves to Christ.

What do we owe to God, the source of all things? Where does our conscience draw the line between serving the state and serving God? We still have a few days to pray for the grace that will allow us to find an answer.